

SERGEI



MIKHALKOV

UNCLE
★
STEERLE
★

AND OTHER POEMS



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**UNCLE
STEEPLE
AND
OTHER POEMS**



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UNCLE STEEPLE

In our street a young man lived,
Known to all the local people;
And because he was so tall,
They all called him Uncle Steeple.

Now, his last name was Stepanov,
And his first name was Stepan;
Of the giants in the district,
He was quite the tallest man.

And because he was so tall,
He was loved by one and all;
Coming home at close of day,
He'd be seen a mile away.

Firm his measured footsteps beat,
As Stepan came down the street;
And his shoes were number fifty—
Few are men who have such feet.



He'd seek shoes at shops and fairs,
Asking for the biggest pairs.
He'd buy coats so long and wide,
You and I could hide inside.
When at last a suit he'd buy,
Which had struck his fancy's eye,
One quick turn before the mirror—
And apart the seams would fly.



Over any fence or wall
He could peep, he was so tall;
Dogs would loudly bark in warning,
Thinking thieves had come to call.

At his mealtimes he would eat
Double portions, as a rule;
And at night he'd stretch his feet
From the bed on to a stool.



When he'd go to see the pictures,
He'd be told by quite a few,
"Sit upon the floor, young fellow,
It is all the same to you!"

When to stadiums went he,
They would let him enter free,
For they thought that Uncle Steeple
Surely must a champion be.

And the neighbours, near and far,
Every grown-up, every kid,
All could tell you where he lived,
Where he worked, and what he did.





**For when kites would catch and dangle,
High above, from wires or trees,
Who but he could disentangle
Them so quickly, with such ease?**

**And the very smallest fry
At parades he lifted high,
Because everyone must see
When our troops go marching by.**



All about loved Uncle Steeple,
All were fond of Uncle Steeple,
For he was the friend of children,
Of the kids in every yard.

When towards his home he strolled,
"Greetings!" shouted young and old;
When he sneezed, they'd shout in chorus,
"Uncle Steeple, don't catch cold!"

Very early Steeple rises,
Opens all his windows wide,
Does his daily exercises,
Takes a shower in his stride.
Not to brush his teeth each morning
Is a thing he can't abide.

Someone's riding on an ass,
Feet a-ploughing through the grass;
Why, that someone's Uncle Steeple;
People stare, as he rides past.
And they all shout to Stepan:
"Try a camel, little man!"



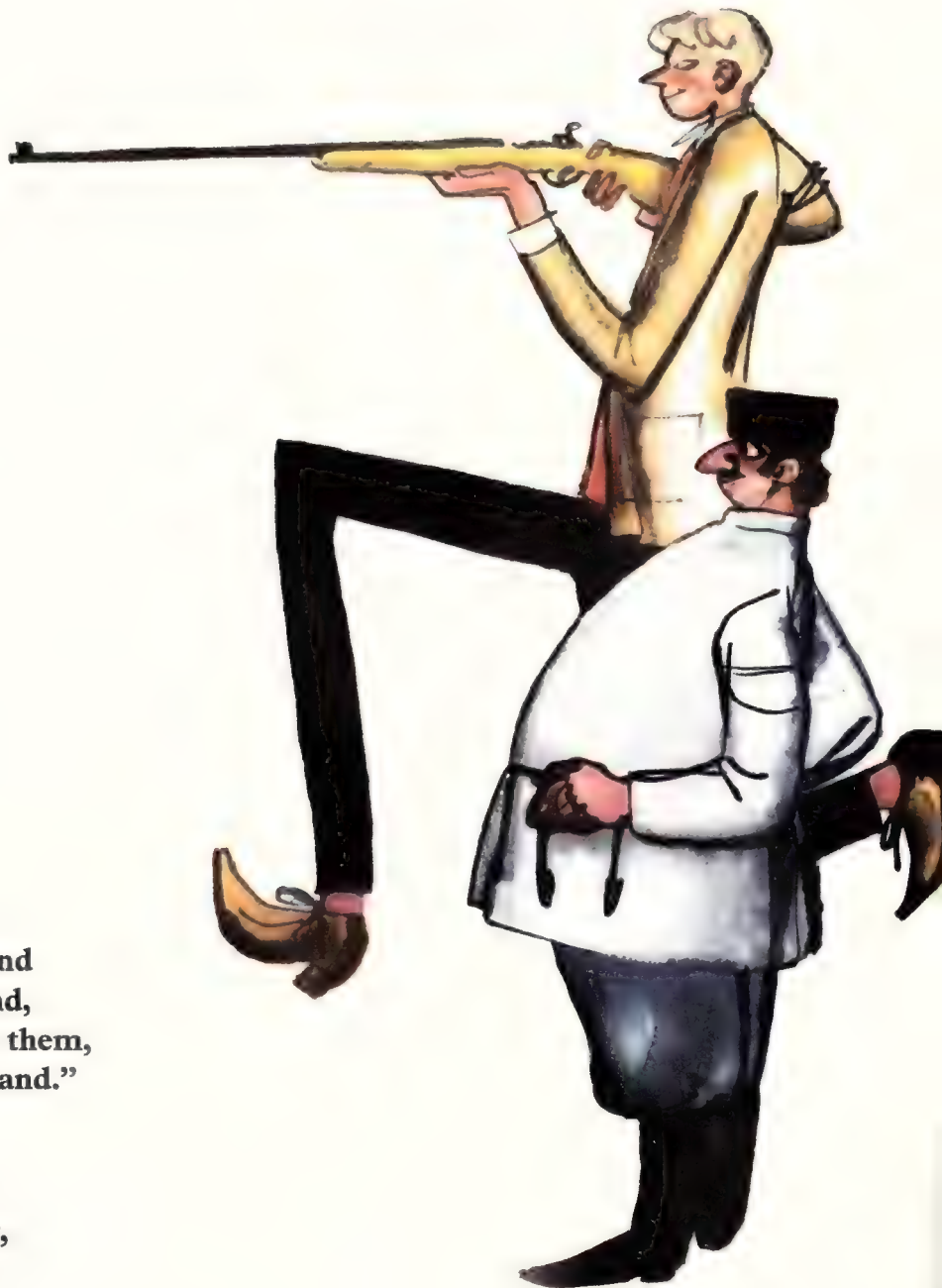
So a camel Steeple tried;
People laughed, until they cried.
Someone made a clever crack,
"You will break the camel's back!
Camels, friend, will never do,
Elephants were made for you!"



On the tower Steeple's waiting
For his turn to take a jump,
He is slightly hesitating,
And his heart goes thump, thump, thump;
While below him laugh the people,
"See the Steeple on a steeple!"

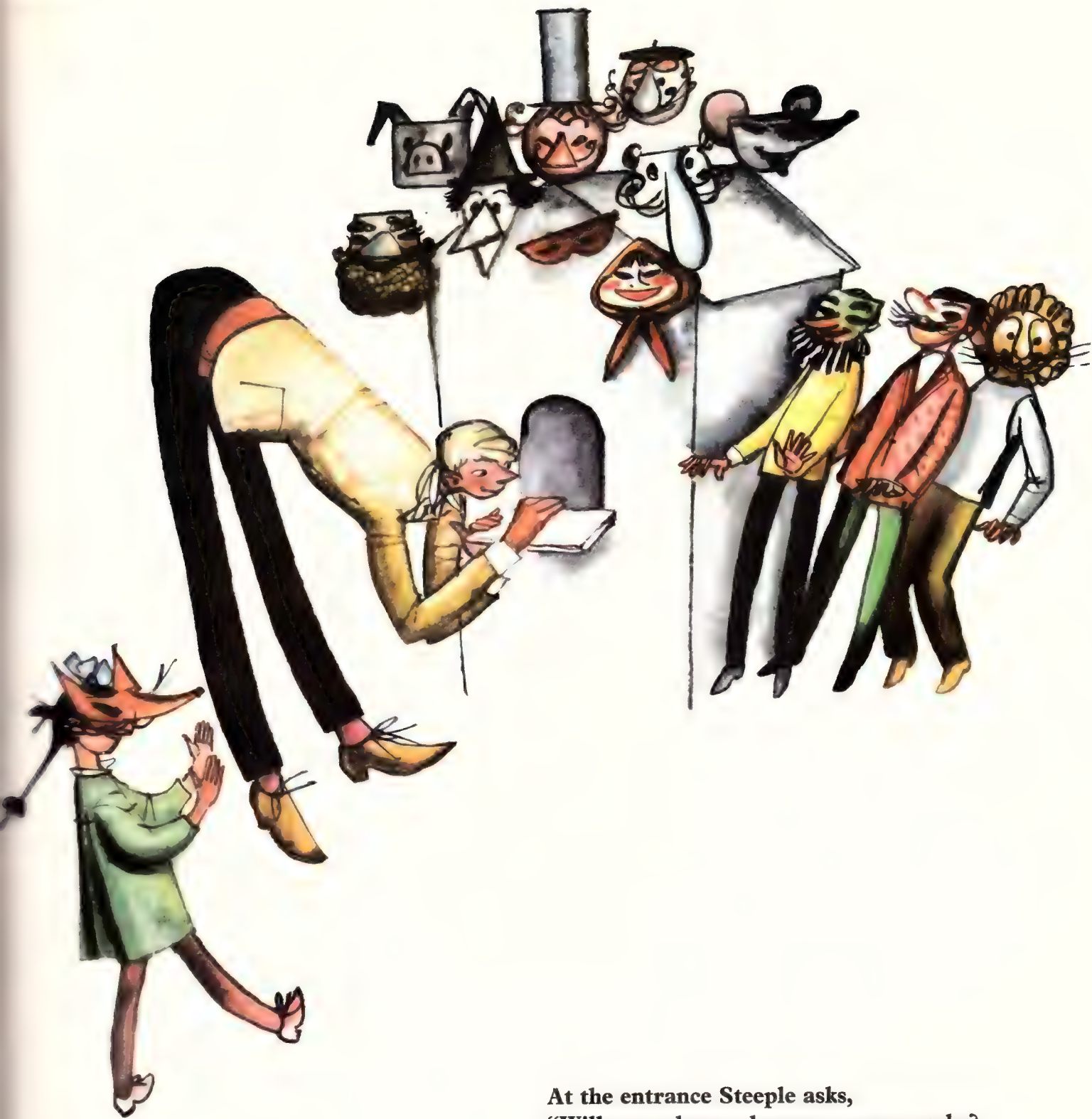


Into shooting-galleries,
Uncle Steeple'd barely squeeze;
To the keeper he would say,
"Let me shoot at targets, please."



But the puzzled man would stand
And, with twinkling eye, demand,
"Surely, you don't need to *shoot* them,
You can *reach* them with your hand."

In the park, this Saturday,
'Twill be very bright and gay;
There'll be music all night long,
Dancing, laughter, merry song.



At the entrance Steeple asks,
"Will you, please, show me some masks?
I want one that will disguise me,
So that none will recognize me,"

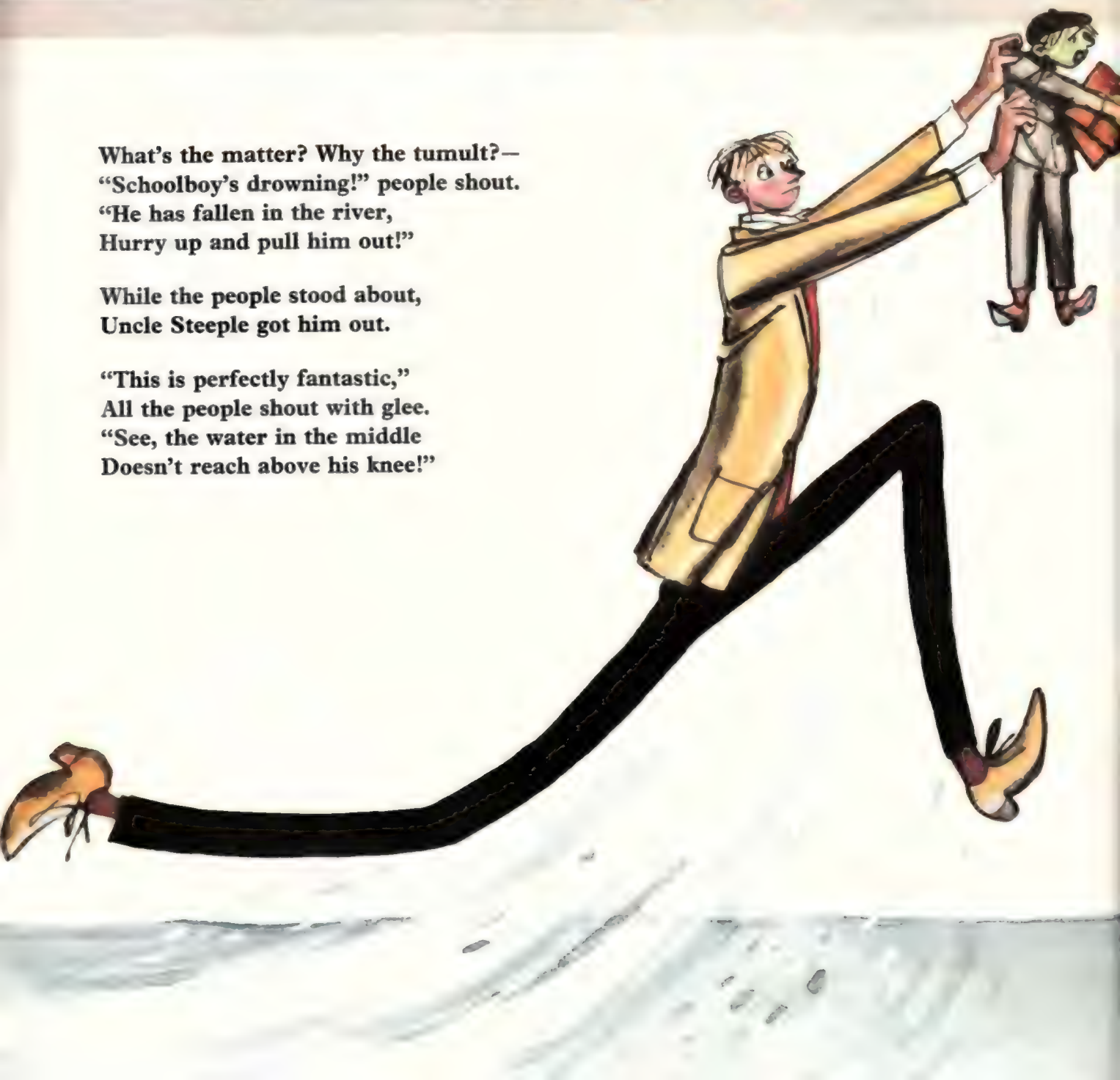
"What's the use?" they say in jest,
"Even though you do your best,
Anyone will recognize you:
You're much taller than the rest."



What's the matter? Why the tumult?—
"Schoolboy's drowning!" people shout.
"He has fallen in the river,
Hurry up and pull him out!"

While the people stood about,
Uncle Steeple got him out.

"This is perfectly fantastic,"
All the people shout with glee.
"See, the water in the middle
Doesn't reach above his knee!"





Frightened, wet, but safe and sound,
Stands the schoolboy on the ground;
Uncle Steeple saved the schoolboy,
Saved a boy who might have drowned.

All the people, for his deed,
Wish to shake him by the hand;
"Ask for anything you need,"
He is made to understand.

"I don't need a single thing,"
Answers Steeple, colouring.



Whistling loud, the engine sped,
While the driver stared ahead;
As they thundered past a station,
To the fireman he said:

“On this line, from end to end,
You’ve seen every semaphore,
But I’ll gladly bet, my friend,
That one you’ve not seen before.”

At the semaphore they halt,
But they cannot understand:
Can their eyesight be at fault?—
Not a semaphore— Stepan!

And they hear Stepan explain:
Look, the track’s washed out by rain;
And I raised my hand on purpose,
So that you would stop the train.”





Why the smoke and all the clatter?
What has happened? What's the matter?

There's a corner house ablaze,
Crowds of idlers stand and gaze;
Firemen ply the flames with water,
As the fire-escapes they raise.

Soon the attic's all in flames,
Birds dash at the window-panes.

In the yard the youngsters crowd,
To Stepanov they all turn
And in anguish cry aloud,
"Please, don't let our pigeons burn!"

Steeple reaches to the attic,
Though he's standing on the ground;
And his hand goes to the window,
Through the flames that lap around.



When he opened up the shutter,
From the window, small and narrow,
Flew the pigeons, all a-flutter—
Eighteen pigeons and— a sparrow.

Grateful children highly praise him,
For he set the pigeons free,

And the grown-ups all advise him
That a fireman he should be.

“I don’t want to be a fireman,”
Was his answer to them all.

“I would rather join the Navy—
If I do not prove too tall.”



**In the corridor there's laughter,
Jokes, and merry conversation.
In the doctor's office Steeple
Strips for his examination.**

**Say the doctors, all in chorus,
"Reaching you is hard to do.
You are quite a problem for us:
We aren't half as tall as you."**

**"We'll examine, said the doctors,
"Both your hearing and your sight.
Is your liver quite in order?
Are your heart and lungs all right?"**

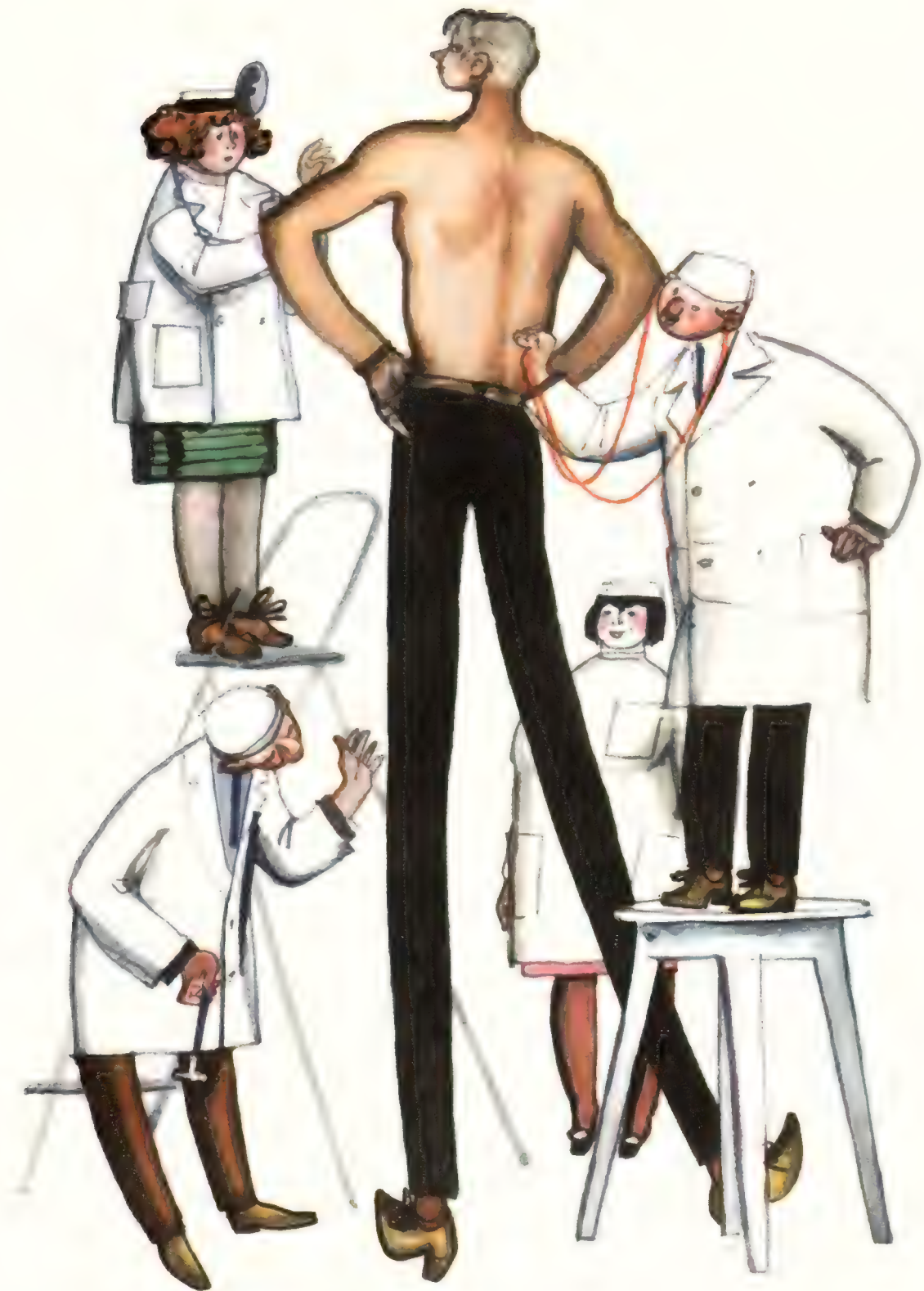
**They examined him and weighed him,
And he passed in every test;
And they said: "Your heart beats soundly
And your lungs are of the best.
Pretty tall, we must confess,
But we'll pass you none the less.**

**"As a tankman you won't do,
Tanks are far too small for you.
As an infantryman? No,
From the trenches you would show.**

**"Now if you become a flyer,
We're afraid your legs would tire:
Planes don't have much room to spare,
You'd be very cramped in there.**

**"For a man who is so tall
Any horse would be too small.
But the navy wouldn't care—
You can serve your country there!"**





**"I'm prepared to serve my people.
Fire and flood for them I'll dare,"
Proudly answered Uncle Steeple,
"You can send me anywhere."**

**Winter, spring, and summer pass
Once again it's snowing hard.
Uncle Steeple, where is he?
There's no answer from the sea,
Not a letter, not a card.**

**Then the little kids, one day,
Had a wonderful surprise,
For a sailor came their way,
Who was Uncle Steeple's size.**

**As he walked along the street,
Snow-flakes crunched beneath his feet.
Maybe you can tell me who
Was that man in navy blue?**

**He wore neatly ironed trousers,
Sailor hat without a brim,
Woolen gloves, a big brass buckle—
Anchors shone all over him.**

**When he reached his home ashore,
No one knew him anymore.
Children asked him, by the door,
"Who may you be looking for?"**





Prouder children you won't meet
Than the children of our street—
For their friend's a Soviet sailor,
Serving in the Baltic Fleet.

When they see Stepanov coming,
All the little kids run out,
But instead of "Uncle Steeple",
"Lighthouse" is the name they shout.

Uncle Steeple turned their way,
And saluted, bright and gay,
As he told the happy children,
"I've come home on leave today.

"Haven't slept the night, what's more,
Walking seems so hard on shore.

"Let me change, and rest my feet,
Have some tea, a cup or two,
Then come in, and you I'll treat
To some tales about the blue.

"About war, the cannonade,
And the Leningrad blockade,
How, when serving on the cruiser,
I was wounded in a raid."







WHAT HAVE YOU

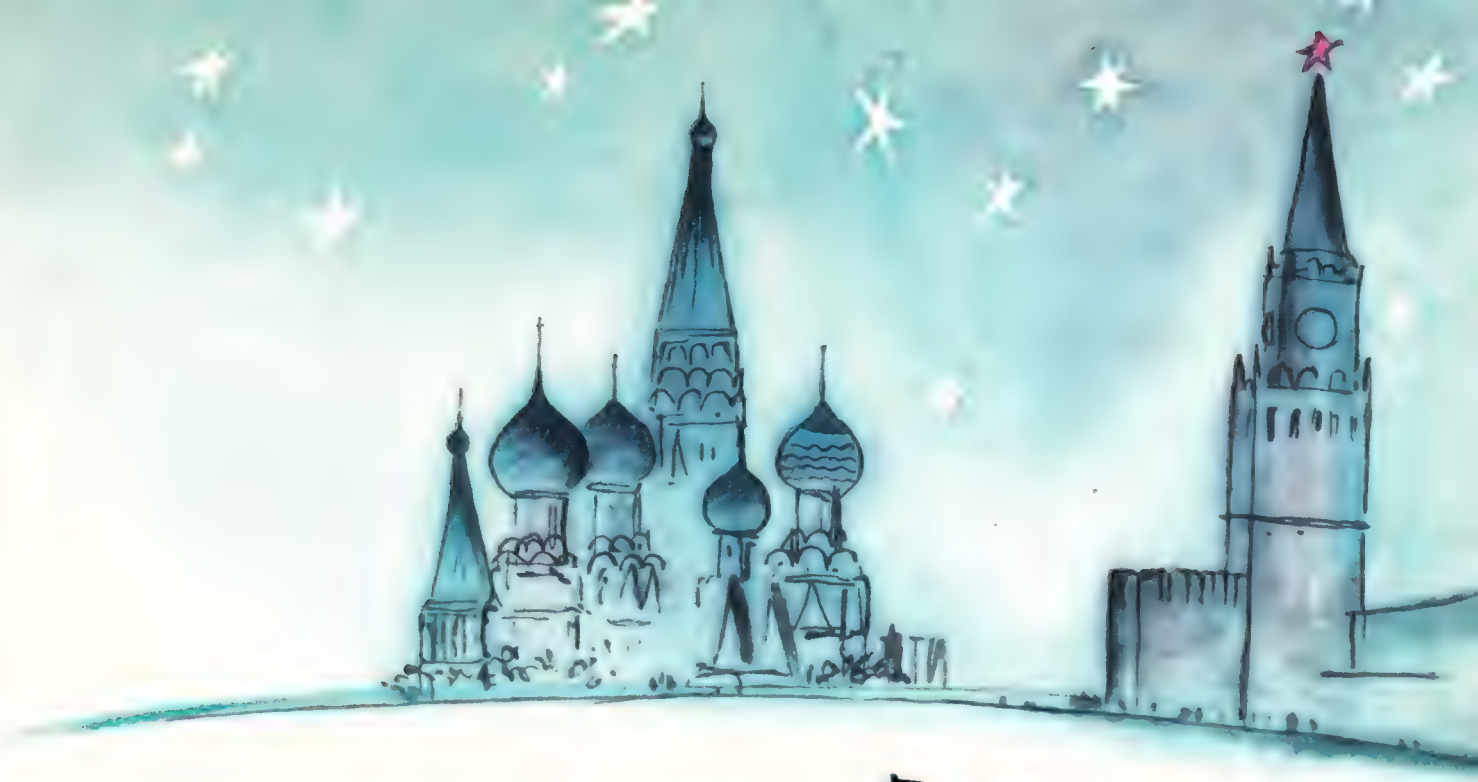
**Some were sitting on the bench,
Some were looking down the street,
Tolya whistled,
Boris sang,
Nick just sat and swung his feet.**



**It was near the end of day,
They had tired of their play.**

**In the sun a puppy lay,
On the fence a sparrow sat,
When we heard somebody say,
Just like that,**

**“Look, I’ve got a nail, now say
What have you?”
“We have visitors today,
What have you?”**



**"Yesterday our cat had kittens,
They have fur as soft as silk;
They're all black with snow-white mittens,
But they won't drink any milk."**

**"Now we have a cockatoo,
What have you?"
"My big brother has a pair,
There!"**

**"From our window, 'way up there,
You can see the big Red Square,
And from your big window-seat,
Just a little of the street."**

**"We were walking in the park,
Just the other afternoon,
And we bought a lightish-dark,
Bluish-yellow toy balloon."**

**"First of all, we had no light,
All last night;
Then they're bringing coal today—
So they say."**



**In the fourth place, my Mamma
Will be flying off again,
For you know that my Mamma
Is the pilot of a plane."**

**Vova answered from the stairs,
"She's a pilot? Well, who cares?"**

**"Now, I have a cousin, Anne;
Her Mum's a militiaman.**

**"And I know two pioneers
Who have Mummy-engineers.
Vera's Mum's an acrobat.
Mum's a pilot?
What of that?"**



**"More important than all others,
Surely, are tram-driver mothers;
And my Mummy," Nata said,
"Drives a tram-car with two trailers."**

**Nina shook her little head,
"What is wrong with Mummy-tailors?
Who would sew the children's clothes?
Mummy-pilots, I suppose?"**

**Pilots fly both day and night,
That is very good and right.**

**Mummy-cooks prepare our food,
That is very right and good.**

**Mummy-doctors cure the flu,
Schools have Mummy-teachers, too.
Mums are all important, mind.
We need Mums of every kind.**

**It was near the end of day,
They had nothing more to say.**





THE SONG OF THE MERRY FRIENDS

We're riding, riding, riding,
To where the rainbow ends,
We are the best of neighbours,
The happiest of friends.
We love the life we're living,
We sing a merry song,
And in our song we're singing
Of how we roll along.

**All aboard! Don't delay!
We are riding off today,
Very gay and spunky,
With our little monkey,
Cat, cock, dog and parrot, too—
Better friends you never knew!**



**When everyone is friendly,
What can be better fun?
You never need to quarrel,
And you love everyone.
So, when you go out riding,
Don't leave your friends behind;
Not only will they help you,
It's merrier, you'll find.**

**All aboard! Don't delay!
We are riding off today,
Very gay and spunky,
With our little monkey,
Cat, cock, dog and parrot, too—
Better friends you never knew!**



We sang, while we were riding,
Our jolly song, and then,
Together as we started,
We all rode home again.
The gentle breezes kissed us,
The sunbeams said, "Good day".
And we all sang in chorus,
As we sped on our way.

All aboard! Don't delay!
We are riding off today,
Very gay and spunky,
With our little monkey,
Cat, cock, dog and parrot, too—
Better friends you never knew!







SAILBOATS

**Never mooring, never docking,
Sails a fleet of paper ships;
Steered by cockroaches for captains
On their long and distant trips.**

**Setting off on such a sailboat
Really should be jolly fun,
With its sail of coloured paper
And a fag-end for a gun.**

But the foremost of the sailboats,
Once a box of cigarettes,
Is no longer looking ship-shape,
Slippery and soaking wet.

Back and forth along the maindeck
Captain Cockroach paces, sore,
Waiting, wet and travel-weary,
For his ship to come near shore.

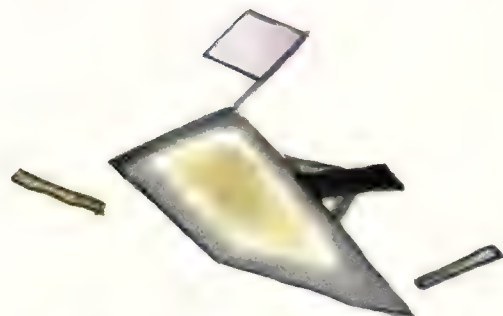
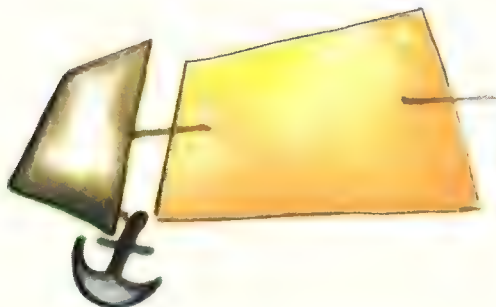
Wiggle-waggle go his whiskers,
Not much shorter than the mast.



Out he peers into the distance
As the waves go rolling past.

On and on the sailboats journey
With the captains in command
Getting more and more impatient
To be somewhere safe on land.

But they don't know on the sailboats
That their trip will soon be done,
That their sea is just a puddle
Which must vanish in the sun.





OUR KITTENS

(a counting-rhyme)

Listen, here's a little story
Which I want to tell to you:
Yesterday our cat had kittens—
Five all kittens— quite a few!

Long we argued how to name them,
Noisy as a troubled hive,
Till at last it was decided
They'd be One, Two, Three, Four, Five.

One's the whitest,
Two's the tallest,
Three's the brightest,
Four's the smallest.
Five is just like Three and Two—
The same pink nose and whiskers too,
The same black spot upon his back,
Sleeping fast from snack to snack.

One, Two, Three and Four and Five—
The gayest family alive.
Come and count them on their mat
Huddled close to Mother Cat.







THE HOTHOUSE PLANT

Who is lying tucked in bed
Under blanket, quilt and plaid?
Who needs half a dozen pillows
For a single silly head?
Who's the good-for-nothing fellow
Who won't rise until he's fed?

Who must wash in lukewarm water
Lest the 'flu should lay him low?



Maybe he's a shaky dotard
Born a hundred years ago?
No!

Who, with mouth stuffed full of pastries,
Wails and whimpers, lying flat:
"Give me this!"
And "Fetch me that!"

Maybe its a helpless patient
Or a cripple speaking so?
No!



Who then is he?
Tell me why
Do his parents pile him high
Though it's almost mid-July
With all sorts of furs and woollens,
Mittens, scarves and felt boots too,
So he shouldn't chill his tonsils
Or be murdered by the 'flu?

P'raps he's going to the Pole
Where the bears from ice-floes call?
Not at all!

No, he's not a polar rover.
He is simply Master Vova,

Mummy's Vova,
Daddy's Vova
From the seventh flat upstairs.
It is he who lies in bed
Under blanket, quilt and plaid
Eating nothing but sweet pastries,
Plums and oranges and pears.

The very minute he awakes
Mum his temperature takes.
Then they dress him
And caress him
And at any time of day
Bring him anything he'll say.



If he stays in bed till late
No one wakes him— school can wait.
If they spot a single cloud
Out of doors he's not allowed.



Now, to finish off my story,
To be frank, I cannot see
What can such a sop be good for;
Nothing much, you must agree.

Neither can he be an airman
Nor a driver on a truck,
Nor a gunner in the Army,
Nor a seaman— that takes pluck.

Such is Vova, eight years old,
Growing up afraid of cold
Like a pot-plant under glass,
The biggest sissy in his class.



CLOCKS AND WATCHES

For your clock to tick and chime,
For your watch to show the time,
And for everyone to know
When to come and when to go,
When to start work,
When to stop,
Ivan Petrovich keeps his shop.

Sad old Granny came complaining,
“Dear, I don’t know what to do.
My cuckoo-clock is out of order:
The cuckoo doesn’t say *cuckoo*!”

So the watchmaker, old wizard,
Set to work without a word.
From the tiny carven window
Once again “*cuckoo*” was heard.

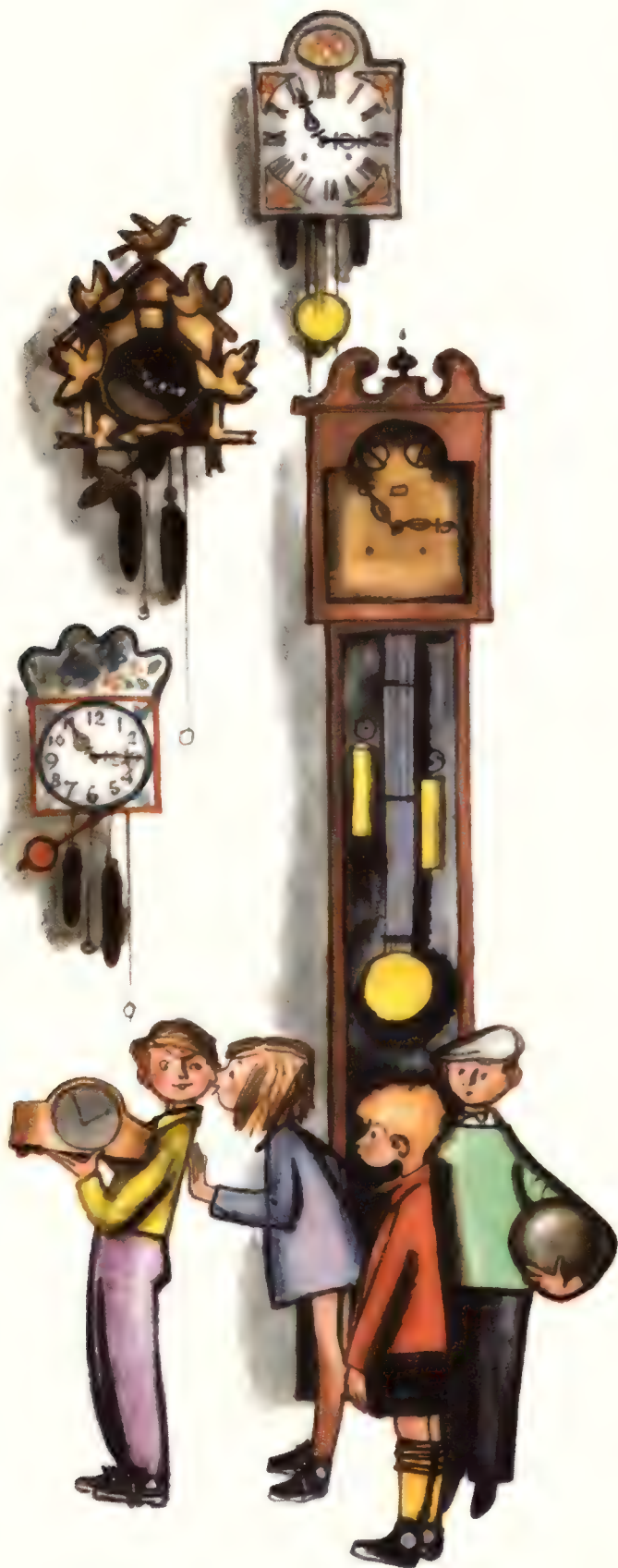


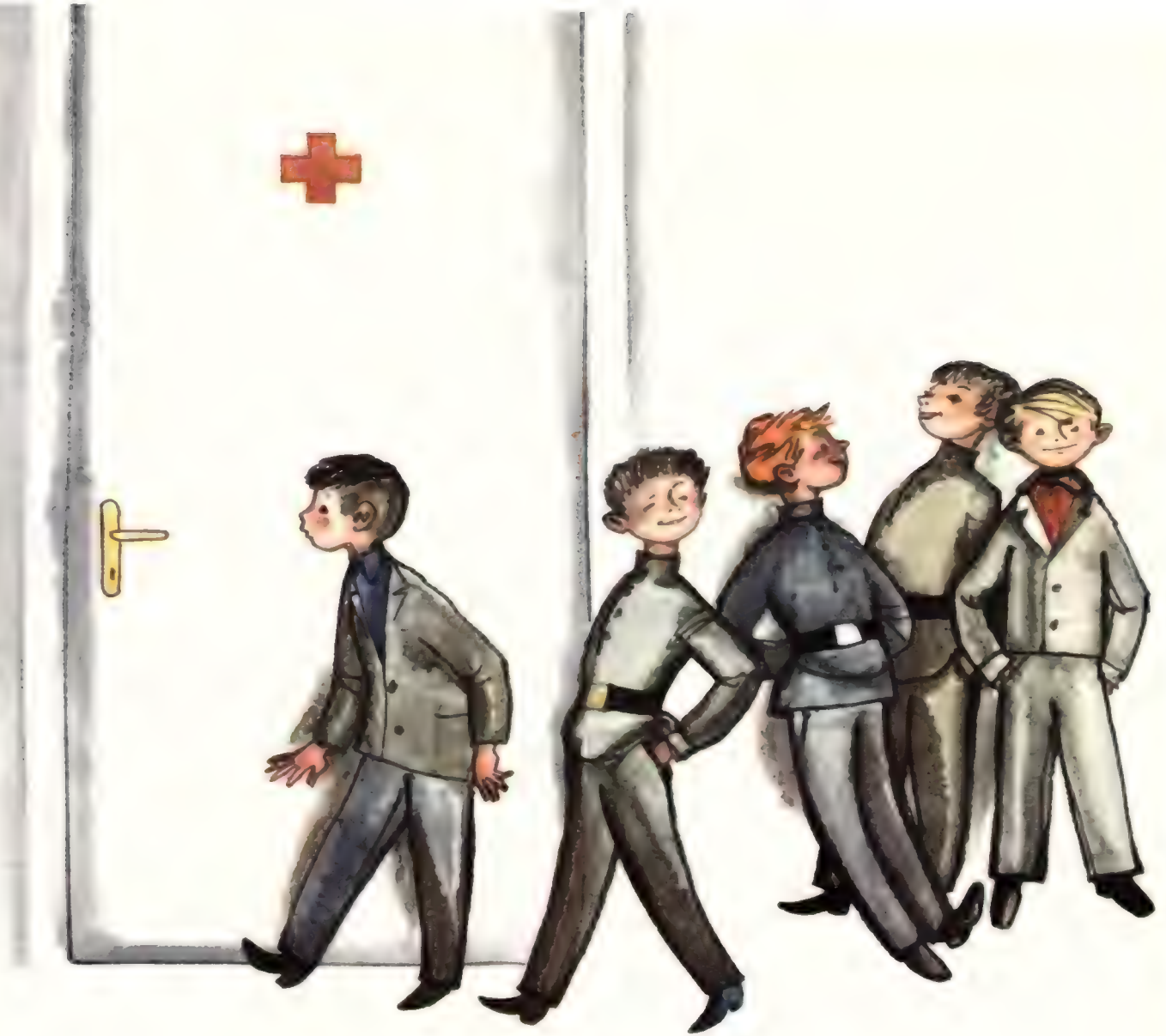
One fine day our ball bounced up
And broke a saucer and a cup.
“Ding!” the clock fell on the floor,
Then stood still and worked no more.

“Uncle Vanya,” we exclaimed,
“Through the district you are famed.
Won’t you shake our clock awake,
If only for old friendship’s sake?”

Winking under bushy eyebrows—
Everything he understands—
Watchmaker Ivan Petrovich
Takes the clock with careful hands.

In a jiffy all is ready—
“Tick-Tock-Tick!” sounds clear and steady.
Now we come to school at eight—
Not too early, not too late.





COURAGE, BOYS!

**"Vaccination! Everyone
Hurry up and have it done!"
Who's afraid of vaccinations?
Just a little bit of patience;
There are nastier things I've stood,
And vaccination does you good!**

**Only sissy-boys and cowards
Have to be egged on and coaxed.
I, though, when I see a syringe,
Shrug my shoulders and crack jokes.**



I'm among the first to enter
The doctor's room on the second floor.
I've got nerves of steel, I'll tell you,
If you didn't know before.

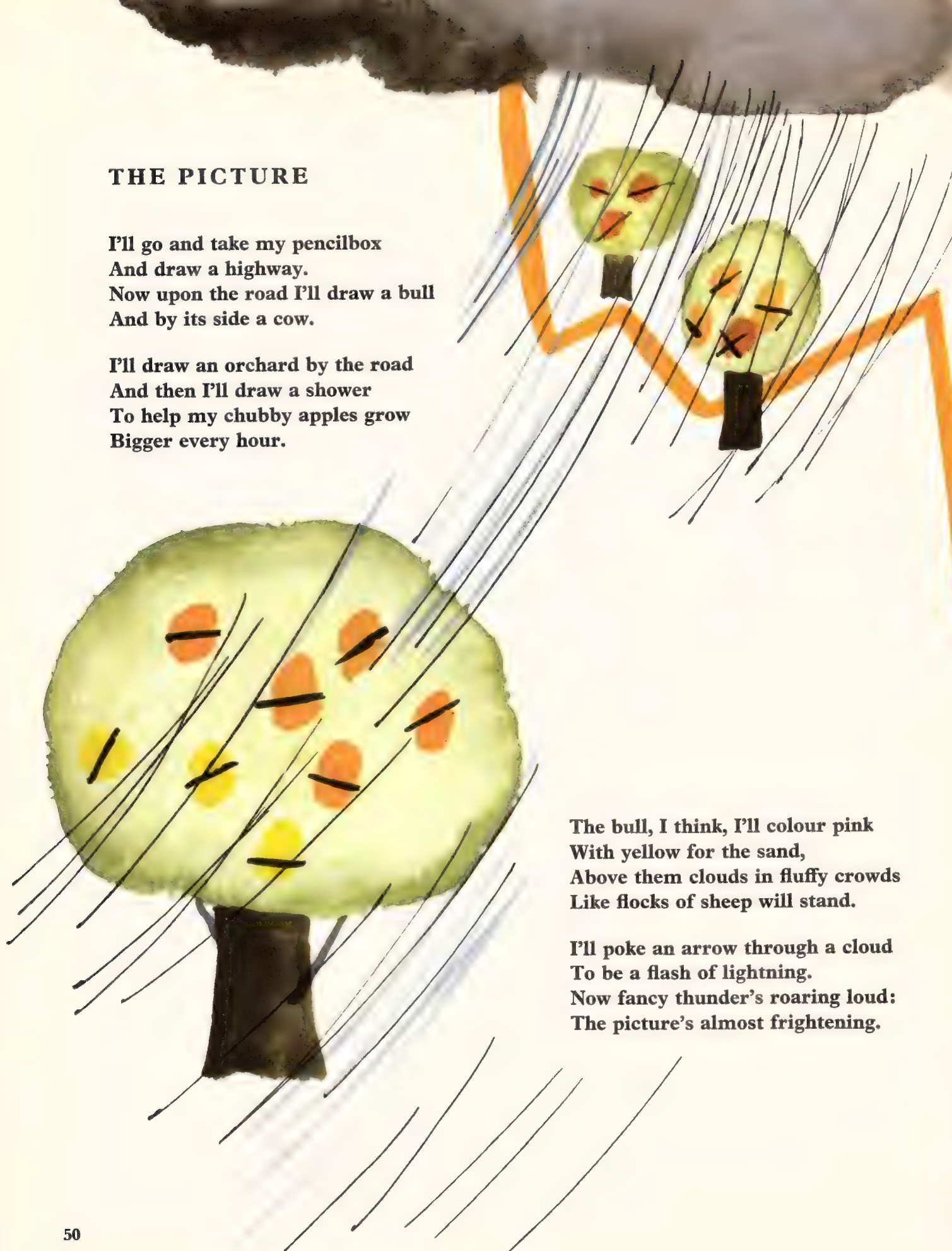
Here's my arm— now, let them prick it.
Tell 'em— maybe they've forgot!
Why, I'd swap my football ticket
For a second vaccine-shot.

"Vaccination! Everyone
Hurry up and have it done."
Why though can't I leave the wall?
I am shaking, after all!

THE PICTURE


I'll go and take my pencilbox
And draw a highway.
Now upon the road I'll draw a bull
And by its side a cow.

I'll draw an orchard by the road
And then I'll draw a shower
To help my chubby apples grow
Bigger every hour.



The bull, I think, I'll colour pink
With yellow for the sand,
Above them clouds in fluffy crowds
Like flocks of sheep will stand.

I'll poke an arrow through a cloud
To be a flash of lightning.
Now fancy thunder's roaring loud:
The picture's almost frightening.



I'll cross the apples out with black,
Which is supposed to mean,
The wind has shaken them all off,
As if they'd never been.

I'll take a ball-pen after that
And let it rain still harder
But now it must be dinner-time.
What is there in the larder?

I'll stand a stool upon the desk,
Make sure it shouldn't fall,
Then take the picture, good or bad,
And pin it on the wall.



OUR PUPPY TUPS

One fine day
We left our pup
All alone
And locked him up.

Not a soul
Remained at home.
Tups was free
To romp and roam.

He behaved,
Our Master Tups,
Like the naughtiest
Of pups.



First, he tore our doll's new frock,
Then gave Bunnikins a knock.
Next he went and left our slippers
On the dresser near the clock.

After that he chased the cat
Round and round about the flat.

On the coal he sat to think
And stood up as black as ink.
In the jug he took a dive—
Scarcely scrambled out alive.
On the bed at last he clambered,
Piled the pillows in a heap,
Sprawling out across the blanket
For a sleep

To the washing bowl we rushed him,
Scrubbed and dried and combed and brushed him.
Leave our Tups alone gain?
Not for anything! That's plain.








THE MERRY TOURIST

Along winding paths to the mountains,
Past lakes that in solitude lay,
Past rivers and past gurgling fountains,
A merry young lad made his way.


Fourteen was the age of this youngster;
A knapsack he bore on his back,
A towel and soap and a tooth-brush
And tooth-paste he had in his pack.





He never was frightened of meeting
A bull or a snake on his way;
He'd smile at them, gaily repeating
These words, as he waved them "good day":

"The things all about us remind me
There's so much to learn and to see,
So, leaving my home far behind me,
I'm roaming lighthearted and free."



No rifle or stick on his shoulder,
He went where the grassy paths led;
And birds, growing bolder and bolder,
Flew fearlessly over his head.

And bulls, who are quarrelsome cattle,
All sent him their friendliest "Moo";
And watch-dogs, whose chains fiercely rattle,
Saluted with wagging tails, too.



He walked along highway and by-way,
And met with grey wolves and brown bears;
Instead of attacking the youngster,
They'd growl and slink off to their lairs.

Each bush he explored, and he listened
To what bird or beast had to say;
He fingered the ripe wheat that glistened,
And smelt the wild flowers so gay.



His clock was the echoing thunder,
His roof was the cloud in the sky;
His diary noted each wonder
That came to his ear or his eye.

To make his long journey more pleasant,
He broke into loud merry song;
He sang, and that song ever present,
Like eagle's wings, bore him along.



And people, on hearing his singing,
To doors and to windows would throng;
In chorus, on every side ringing,
Their voices would join in his song.

Nor could his gay song be resisted,
So banging their doors, they left home,
Forgetting that wild beasts existed,
They followed the wide roads to roam.





They went on in streams never-ending,
Their merry ranks steadily grew;
And with them down highway and by-way,
His gay little melody flew:

“Untrodden paths cannot dismay us,
No precipice, glacier, delay.
The steepest ascent cannot stay us—
They yield as we sing on our way.”

And I also heard the lad singing,
And recognized him for a friend,
And hatless from my chamber flinging,
I sang it with him to the end.





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Translated from the Russian

Drawings by F. Lemkul

СЕРГЕЙ МИХАЛКОВ

“ДЯДЯ СТЕПА” И ДРУГИЕ СТИХОТВОРЕНИЯ

На английском языке

REQUEST TO READERS

Progress Publishers would be glad to have your opinion of this book, its translation and design and any suggestions you may have for future publications.

Please send your comments to 21, Zubovsky Boulevard, Moscow, USSR.



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